



ISLAND COMMENTARY | FURLOUGH FRIDAYS

Shame on us if students suffer

By Cynthia Thielen

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The aftermath of the collective bargaining agreement between the Hawaii State Teachers Association, the state Board of Education, the state Department of Education and the state was a disaster.

We now have the fewest instruction days in the nation, a true black eye for Hawaii. Meanwhile, the federal government set aside competitive grant moneys for public education called "Race to the Top Funds." Ironically, it appears that we are racing for the bottom.

The situation represents symptoms of deeper problems that have sat unaddressed for years: education reform. See professor Randy Roth's new essay, "Public Education in Hawaii: Past, Present & Future" at www.law.hawaii.edu/sites/files/rroth/Essay.pdf, in which he states:

"Changing the status quo will necessarily involve a shift of power. The parties who currently wield that power -- primarily union leaders and elected officials who enjoy union support -- are not going to give up that power simply because it's the 'right thing to do.' As Governor Cayetano has said, 'The people with power will not give it up unless they get something in return -- there will have to be a negotiation of some kind.'"

Ultimately, the success of any real reform falls not only on legislators and those within the DOE, but on those outside the DOE as well.

Where do we go from here? Many sets of circumstances over the years led every governor, Republican and Democrat, down this path. And while some ideas are familiar, some have come to the surface as a result of the furlough situation.

First, in agreeing on furloughing instruction days to close the budget gap, it became clear during the collective bargaining process that no party represents the children. Children are the most important, and weakest, stakeholders in the public education system. They have no direct voice in the process, no direct means to hold anyone accountable. But if anyone deserves a voice at the bargaining table, it's the children because they are the *only* reason we have a public education system to begin with. Therefore, we should mandate in law exactly that -- a representative for the children at the collective bargaining table with a vote and say in the process.

Second, when the dust settled and the agreement was ratified by HSTA, we had the least amount of instructional days in the nation, yet another black eye for a DOE consistently ranking near the bottom in every nationally accepted means of comparison for student performance. If Hawaii hopes to provide

public school students with an education on par with the average state, it cannot do so with the least number of instructional days. Therefore, we should mandate in law a baseline number of instructional days equal to the state with the highest amount of teaching days as well as a baseline number of instructional hours within those days.

Finally, it comes as little surprise that in the wake of this agreement, and the troubles caused by it, stakeholders are pointing fingers at each other. That is the way the system was created ... with a total lack of accountability. A financial, management, and performance audit of the DOE would highlight all of the areas legislators need to address to create an accountable system and to provide the means for those within the DOE to succeed, and we should pass a resolution calling for this audit in the 2010 session.

Each of the three ideas will be introduced as legislation in January.

These are common sense solutions in uncommonly difficult times, but as professor Roth pointed out, the only way change happens is if we hold ourselves accountable and do something about it, because history shows the stakeholders won't.

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